



A Transportation History of Willits

Winter 2001

by Frank Lortie, Caltrans Cultural and Community Studies Office

The first non-Native Americans who came to the Willits-Little Lake Valley area passed through here in the early 1850s, on horseback and on foot, on their way north to the new settlement of Eureka and the mines of the Trinity Mountains. Travelers returning to the San Francisco Bay Area told of the rich lands and redwood forests in the region. The first permanent settlement of the Willits region is credited to Samuel, Martin and Henry Baechtel. In 1855, the three brothers drove a herd of cattle from Marin County to Little Lake Valley with the intention of setting up their own farms in the fertile valley. By 1861, a frontier settlement, called Little Lake, had been created at the southwest corner of Little Lake Valley and was located on Sam Baechtel's ranch. The village had a store and trading post, a saloon, and a public hall. When the Baechtel brothers first entered the area and for decades afterward, the rugged mountains around Little Lake Valley and its remoteness from the major population centers to the south thwarted rapid settlement in this part of Mendocino County. These transportation barriers kept Willits from the economic expansion and influx of population early settlers had been hoping for. Consequently, Willits and Little Lake Valley grew slowly during the last part of the 1800s.

By the time Hiram Willits laid out the town site of Willitsville in 1877, about a mile north of the

Baechtel ranch, Mendocino County had built a public road connecting Ukiah with the settlements at Little Lake Valley. Apparently, the road followed the alignment of former U.S. 101, now Walker Road, after it crossed the Ridgewood Summit. But it turned where Baechtel Road branches off the highway today and proceeded past Martin Baechtel's house and through the center of Little Lake Village and in front of Samuel Baechtel's ranch house (both Baechtel houses are still there today).



The old road then turned northward on to Willitsville's Main Street. Slow growth did not mean no growth for Willits (it shortened its name in the 1880s), and regular stagecoach service and frequent deliveries by freight wagons from Ukiah allowed improved, but limited, access to markets in the outside world. By the end of the 1880's, Willits, with a population of around 400, offered a full array of retail establishments and public services for the resident and traveler alike. Still, products from local farmers and sawmill operators were confined to regional markets, which did not allow much room for growth.

All this changed in 1902 when, with much fanfare, the first train of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad (a subsidiary of the Southern Pacific Railroad since 1900) arrived in Willits. Now that there was a reliable and efficient means for transporting large quantities of redwood lumber to the San Francisco Bay Area, local sawmills could

expand their capacities and cut much more lumber than could be consumed locally. As an indication of the important connection between the railroad and lumber production, several of the owners of the Northwestern Redwood Company, based in Willits, were on the board of directors of the NWP Railroad. Passenger traffic was also important for the NWP, and by the 1910s it offered regularly scheduled trains for Bay Area visitors to the Willits area. In 1912, the Union Lumber Company finished its railroad, the California Western, linking Fort Bragg with Willits and the NWP. Now as much a "railroad town" as a lumber town, Willits had become the commercial and transportation hub of northern Mendocino County. The beautiful 1916 redwood railroad station on Commercial Street (listed on the National Register of Historic Places) is a fitting symbol of Willits' important role in the development of the railroad and the lumber industry in California's northwest.

The decade of the '20s saw a rapid increase in automobile traffic, mostly from the San Francisco Bay Area. Auto courts and other resorts catering to the auto tourists multiplied along the route of the Redwood Highway (today's U.S. 101) from Marin County to Eureka. In 1923, the highway reached the Oregon border. Unfortunately, the economic boom of the 1920s did not survive to the end of the decade, and Northwestern Redwood Company, along with several other large mills in the region, shut down its operation, probably as a result of over-supply. Also during this time, the State Division of Highways closed its District 1 office in town and moved its fifty employees to Eureka (the former office is now the Willits Veterans Building on U.S. 101 just south of the high school). The Great Depression of the 1930s compounded the economic problems of the region as sawmills and businesses closed their doors, and ultimately only two sawmills (both on the coast) were able to keep operating until the outbreak of World War II.

Wartime construction at military facilities and around defense plants brought full production to Willits' lumber industry, and the post-war boom in housing and commercial construction kept

Mendocino County sawmills busy into the 1960s. The trucking industry, which had been expanding steadily in the 1930s, now had become an essential factor in the redwood lumber business, and the NWP Railroad started to feel the effects as its revenues declined sharply. The California Western railroad also suffered from the competition but was able to compensate for this by running regular excursion trains through the spectacular scenery of the mountains between Fort Bragg and Willits. Tourism had become an essential industry for Willits after the war, and the continuing improvements to U.S. 101, combined with the post-war economic boom, encouraged thousands of motorists from all over northern California to vacation in the Redwood Country.

From the 1920s to the 1950s, U.S. 101 passed through the major towns along its route in Sonoma, Mendocino, and Humboldt Counties. The highway was also the Main Street of those communities. The economic benefits derived from the expansion of the tourist trade and the increase in truck traffic on U.S. 101 were being offset by the problems of traffic congestion on the highway once it entered a town's commercial center. As the freeway era progressed from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, drivers came to expect a fast, convenient, uninterrupted trip on the state's super-highways. So the delay motorists and truckers faced in the towns on the U.S. 101 corridor, especially during the summer months, increased demands for some relief.

Bypassing the Main Streets was seen as the solution, and over the years, large sections of the highway from Marin County to the Oregon border were rerouted around town commercial centers to expedite traffic flow and improve safety. Some town merchants and residents feared that a bypass would hurt local business and encroach upon farmlands on the town's fringes. Others welcomed the bypass as a rescue from the traffic jams on "Main Street" and as an inducement for suburban development outside the town's old historic core. Historically, most highway projects involve some controversy, and bypass proposals are no exception.